

Leadership

Essentials for the successful classical music presenter

What is artistic leadership?

After the composer and performer, there is no more important role in classical music than that of the artistic leader. In fact, without them, not only composers and performers but entire organizations and their listeners can be deprived of opportunities to create, to perform, to bring music to people, and even to hear live classical music.

Artistic leadership is more than fund raising, marketing and PR, and artistic administration. It is all about inspiring faith in and commitment to making music happen. It is about assuring a community, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that great music is not only desirable but essential in a civilized society. It is about convincing people that without music, their communities and the lives they live in them are wanting of some of the best the world has to offer. And further assuring them that to have it is not an extravagance or an exclusionary, elitist privilege: it is as much of a human right as it is to watch the sun rise, to hear the ocean roar.

But if we want to experience great music, like the sunrise and the ocean, we must go to it, bring it to ourselves. There are investments to be made in order to more fully enjoy any of the world's most extraordinary assets. The return on those investments can be of life-changing significance. And it's the artistic leader's responsibility to bring the conviction, the talent, the knowledge and the human interaction it takes to the table in order to enable a community to reap the benefits of engagement with the greatest music ever composed.

How do artistic leaders fit into the music industry? What are their goals and challenges?

The performer and concert organizer share certain goals which bind them together to create something larger than the sum of their parts. Informing that partnership is a shared mission that guides work of both, from the musician's labors in the practice room to the organizer's welcome of the audience.

(Concert organizers, from time to time, need to remind themselves that the performers they present, with few exceptions, all began studying music at very young ages and continue to pursue musical ideals that are beyond their reach. Such is the nature of true artistic quest: one never attains the mountaintop. It is the journey, the struggle, the search, that makes them interesting artists. Perfection in the arts is not a sustainable goal, but the seeking of it is. If you have true artists on your stage, they are obsessed with service to their art beyond all else. Their personal measure of success on any given night is whether they've contributed to their art in a meaningful way.)

In a similar way, the most successful concert organizers we've known have practiced their trade with the same intense devotion as the performers practice their music. Their mission is to draw in listeners, engage them, and keep them coming back, usually in increasing numbers. Their own dedication to the music sets an example to follow, shines through, and for those who love and revere great music, it only takes being an honest and open advocate.

That is not always as simple as it sounds. In an age where classical music is no longer assumed to be the greatest and only music around (and is sadly regarded as the opposite by many), the evangelical skills of the presenter, on behalf of the art, have gained paramount importance. Presenters today are not only called upon to book their concerts with intelligence, but often expected to convince prospective listeners that going to a classical music concert, in principle, is a good idea. And that is a tall order, when popular culture's immediate rewards have fueled an appetite for a kind of entertainment that often only skims the surface of its genre.

So, without further analysis on the current state of the classical music industry, may we simply say what we think classical music organizers should be doing and how they should behave?

Have an Identity

People will trust other people sooner than they will marketing. Make yourself and your intentions known personally to everyone who works for you and to your listeners. Attend every event that is under your watch. Interact with everyone you can. Speak to the audience and groups of donors or subscribers. Make sure that your passion rubs off on people, and make sure they know you and from where you are coming.

Take Responsibility

Assume full responsibility for what and who people hear. Do not blame a choice of artist or repertoire on a review you read, what a manager told you about someone, or what the media says people the kind of music people want to hear. Do what you believe in most deeply, and be ready to take the credit if works, or to step aside if it doesn't.

The Power of a Positive Attitude

Never, ever, speak negatively about classical music. Do not ever repeat what you or others may have read or heard about aging and declining audiences, and charges of irrelevance or elitism. Don't mention it, don't discuss it, ever. Your role is to believe in music so deeply that in your view, all those who question its relevance and survival are simply wrong. Don't be afraid to say it. Your faith can never come into question and if it does, you could lose your audience and the support of your organization in a heartbeat. If you harbor any doubts about the future of classical music and its value to a civilized world, you will never be an effective artistic leader for classical music. If your attitude is unwaveringly positive, you will be followed. People board trains that move, not sinking ships.

Never Under-estimate Your Listeners

Set the bar for them higher, never lower. They will feel better if you expect more of them. Never, ever, dumb anything down to try to entice listeners. If you do, they'll come once and unless you feed them the same dumbed-down product, they won't come back. You want listeners to grow in their understanding of and experience with great music, not the opposite. And they will grow: They will follow quality forever as it's a never-ending road leading only to more greatness and deeper rewards.

Tell the Truth

We've all heard and usually laugh at the commercials for "classical music to relax you." So, don't follow that method: great music is not about relaxing; it's about being engaged for a couple of hours like one engages with a great play or movie, or over days and weeks with a great book. Much music is joyful and uplifting, but if a great piece of music happens to be gloomy, depressing, harrowing, tense, edgy,

provocative or the like, say it. Nobody lies about movies like Schindler's List or plays like Death of a Salesman in order to sell tickets. Great music reflects life in all its dimensions.

Be a Chef

Treat your listeners like you would treat your customers if you ran one of the world's great restaurants. Look at your programming: is it balanced? Is each concert (meal) going to satisfy as a whole? Do the pieces (dishes) go well together and even complement each other? And what about changing that menu every season? What did they not hear (eat) last year, or ever? What music (foods) would expand and deepen their appreciation?

Know Music

You don't need an encyclopedic knowledge of music to run a good music series; such knowledge won't ensure success anyway if not used intelligently. But you'll find that as you strive to Be a Chef and Tell the Truth about the music you present, knowing more about it is very helpful. The genre of what we call classical music dwarfs, in size and depth, all other genres of music, which appear as slivers in classical music's timeline of some four hundred years. There's a lot there to digest and organize. Help your listeners do that by providing them some context so they feel increasing secure and better informed about the music you want them to hear.

Don't Put Blame Elsewhere

If your organization is struggling with attendance, fund raising or audience engagement, blame yourself or your leadership. Never, ever, blame the music, which will be here nourishing the souls of countless listeners long after we're gone. It's not even acceptable to blame society and its habits, even though those habits currently contribute a lot of challenges for presenters of high art in all genres. Being able to rise to the challenge of breaking through the noise and distractions of our age is essential for any arts presenter today. Are you one of them?

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